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Is Max Weber Wrong? The Confucian Ethic, Migrant Workers, and China’s Rise

Fang Deng

Max Weber (1864–1920) was a German sociologist and political economist best known for his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In this work, Weber asked two questions: first, what motivating forces prompted the rise and expansion of modern capitalism; and, second, what was the genesis of these forces? Weber contended that development of the spirit of capitalism was the most important force, and identified two elements that form the core of this spirit: diligent performance of one’s duty in a calling; and opposition to traditionalism. Then he asked what the genesis of this spirit was. In examining the post-Reformation shift of Europe’s economic center away from Catholic countries toward Protestant countries, Weber noticed that all Protestant countries shared the same anti-traditionalist orientation and the precept of diligence in relation to one’s calling—a hallmark of Calvinist doctrine. He concluded that the Protestant ethic is the origin of the spirit of capitalism.

Confucianism: A System of Norms and Values, As Opposed to the Protestant Ethic

Weber also asked why capitalism arose only in the West, not in other societies. In China, he found, the Confucian ethic served as a religious barrier to the development of capitalism. “In Weber’s view,” journalist Fareed Zakaria recounted in the March/April 1994 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, “the characteristics of Confucianism militated against the development of a spirit of capitalism, and Confucian-based cultures discouraged all the attributes necessary for success in capitalism” (125). The comparison in Table 1 (below) captures Weber’s rationale.

Was Weber right? Have Confucian-based cultures discouraged the attributes necessary for success in capitalism? Today, in the latest age of globalization, China has been experiencing an extraordinary transformation toward capitalism. China’s industrial revolution is the largest and most accelerated in world history. Just one generation ago, China was one of the poorest countries in the world; now it is the world’s largest exporter and importer. If Weber was right, how has China overcome the “religious barrier” — its Confucian ethic — during its economic growth? Or was Weber wrong?

Calvinism	Confucianism
The Calvinist ethic motivated believers to work hard and be successful in business. The notion of a “calling” meant that individuals had to take action as an indication of their salvation.	Confucianism did not require believers to fulfill God’s demands upon a sinful world as a condition for salvation. Confucianism had no basis for inducing the individual to live a religiously oriented life.
Earning money within the modern economic order is the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling, and material wealth is a sign of salvation.	The pursuit of profit is an individual act motivated by greed. The superior man comprehends righteousness; the small man comprehends profit.
Puritan rationalism meant rational mastery of the world.	Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world.

Table 1. Calvinism and Confucianism Compared



Coastal development and SEZs along the coast of China are prompting growth of the rural-to-urban shift
(Source: <http://open.lib.umn.edu/worldgeography/chapter/10-2-emerging-china/>).

Migrant Workers: The Engine Driving China's Economy

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber used test cases, including individual-level evidence, to assess the interplay between motivations, cultural values, beliefs, and economic conduct. Similarly, an understanding of the impact of Confucianism on China's rise requires the study of the relationship between the beliefs and actions of ordinary people. Since the 1980s, China has built three huge

export processing zones from scratch, and all three zones are located on China's east and southeast coasts, where the provinces are more advanced and house a better infrastructure than the inland provinces. While the bulk of China's population lives in the north,

west, and southwest, the three zones have experienced serious shortages of laborers. At the same time, 280 million Chinese peasants living in poverty have left their families in the past 30 years to move from the west of China to the east and from the north

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to the south to search for jobs. This has created the largest labor migration in human history.

The Chinese government has been too unprepared and inefficient to deal with the consequences of a migration with such an unimaginable scale. The government directed no official mobilizations, nor did it have in place any formal employments agencies, or official reception centers from the 1980s to the 2000s. These peasants

The money they send home has helped to lift 600 million people out of poverty in just 25 years. In this way, migrant workers are the heart of China's staggering economic rise, and the real engine driving China's economy.

What has motivated the migration workers to make such an enormous change in their lives? How is it that they have the capacity to work and accept hardship in a way that many people do not? Taped interviews

food and a place to live; therefore, I sent all my salary (25 cents an hour) to my parents. In 1995, my sister found a job for me at Guangzhou, in the printing house, where she and one of my brothers worked. No words can describe how happy I was. I worked very hard. Although the pay was only 57 cents an hour, I managed to send more than 50% of my salary to my parents. It was a job that I dreamed of, and I wanted to work there for the rest of my life" (taken from *Dream Chaser*, Guangdong TV, December, 2013).

The majority of migrant workers in China share these three cultural traits: strong belief in personal responsibility, a pragmatic approach, and happiness regardless of material wealth.

on-the-move face constant challenges: What should I do to get rid of the poverty? If I decide to leave home, where should I go? How do I find a job? Could I survive in one of the big cities without my family? Having left behind everything that was familiar to them, they must adapt to the strange new world without knowing whether it will bring them comfort or pain.

In China, these peasants are called "migrant workers," though most Westerners characterize them as "slaves working in sweatshops." For three decades, they have been willing to work for any wages that employers are willing to pay, and they often work around the clock. Although they only make \$270.00 a month on average, most send about half of their salaries home.

with a number of these migrant workers provide some answers. Two cases are particularly instructive.

Case 1: "Do Everything to Make Myself Useful!"

Chuanjun Zhu
(Male, 39 years old)

"One of my brothers had an accident in 1992, which immediately put my family into deep debt. My parents looked at me with tears in their eyes, and I realized that it was time for me to fulfill my obligation to my family. I dropped out of school, left home, and became a migrant worker. Although I was only 16, I was determined to find a job and some money to help my parents get rid of the debt. I got a job in a car wash in Shantou, which is 800 miles from home. The shop provided

Case 2: A Happy Family in a Public Restroom. Hongqi Liu
(Male, 40 years old)

"I came to Beijing in 2004 from a town that is 600 miles from Beijing, and got my job as the maintainer of a public restroom in a city park. I have a wife, two daughters, and a son. We live in a maintenance room located inside the public restroom, and it is about 50 square feet. The home where we used to live is much larger than 50 square feet, but jobs have not been available there. The only reason for us to come to Beijing is that there are jobs here. I have worked here for 10 years, and my monthly salary has increased from \$128.00 to \$224.00. I have nothing to complain about. My family and I are very content with what we have, and we are very grateful to our government for providing our family with jobs" (taken from *Time Report · China Reportage*, Number 3, 2012).

**The Confucian Ethic:
The Spiritual Foundation
of China's Rise**

These cases—two among hundreds of thousands—share three cultural traits. First, both characters were born and grew up in poverty. Instead of pitying themselves and blaming their poverty on society, they each left home and went 600–800 miles to search for a job.

	Confucianism	Western Culture
How is society organized?	Society consists of five relationships. Human beings are not free, and they have obligations defined by their positions in these relationships.	Society consists of individuals, and all human beings are created free and equal, with individual rights and freedom.
What determines our destinies?	Individual efforts and external conditions determine our destinies, but external conditions are wholly beyond our control.	Anything is yours, if you want it badly enough. Try in earnest, and you will succeed.
What is the genesis of happiness?	Happiness is a natural outcome of your state of mind regardless of external conditions.	Happiness is based on external factors, such as wealth, success, social acceptance, etc.

Table 2. Confucianism and Western Culture Compared

Their strong belief in self-reliance and personal responsibility motivated them. Second, both of them have a pragmatic approach to life. They took any job they could get and did everything they could to keep the job so they could make money to take care of their families. Third, both of them live happy lives, although they are not rich and have to work very hard to make a living. The majority of migrant workers in China share these three cultural traits: strong belief in personal responsibility, a pragmatic approach, and happiness regardless of material wealth. What is the basis of these three cultural traits?

China is a society without religion. American sinologist Professor Derk Bodde observed: “It is ethics (especially Confucian ethics), and not religion... which provided the spiritual basis in Chinese civilization” (quoted in Yang, *Religion and Chinese Society*, 1970). The three cultural traits shared by migrant workers are based on three concepts of Confucianism—concepts that are the opposite of those that guide Western culture. According to Confucius, social order is in harmony with five relationships: husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends and friends, and superiors and inferiors. Everyone occupies some positions in the relationships such as father,

daughter, employer, employee, etc., and each individual must fulfill the responsibilities defined by the positions they occupy.

In Case 1, Chuanjun worked to fulfill his obligation to help his parents to pay off the family debt and left home when he was only 16 years old. Since then, assuming the responsibility to take care of his parents became a driving force in his life. In Case 2, Hongqi found a job in Beijing with the help of a friend. For the following two years, he paid his friend \$16.00/month in order to show his gratitude, although his salary was only \$128.00/month. The strong desire of migrant workers to fulfill their obligations to their family, friends, and coworkers has produced not only mutual affection but also strong motives for a meaningful life.

“Knowing Ming” is another concept in Confucianism accepted by the migrant workers. According to Confucius,

“Ming” means the inevitability of the world: there is something that we cannot control. For migrant workers who grew up on farms, it has been easy to grasp the concept that they cannot control the “success or failure” of their activities, because “Mother Nature” significantly impacts their harvests in ways that are totally beyond their control.

The migrant workers who know “Ming” are pragmatic, tolerant, flexible, and content with what they have. For both Chuanjun and Hongqi, any available job is the best job, because they have it in their hands, and they don’t dream of something that is beyond their control. They focus all their attention on working hard, without worrying whether they will succeed or fail. As a result, many of them have made significant progress in their careers. In only seven years, for example, Chuanjun in Case 1 evolved from being a temporary worker to becoming

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his company's director of production planning, and, later, regional sales director. Hongqi in Case 2 is a very happy person, although he and his family live in a 5-square-foot maintenance room located inside the public restroom. He even named his daughter "Happiness." Where does his happiness come from?

Confucius praised Hui, one of his best students: "Incomparable indeed was Hui. A handful of rice to eat, a gourdful of water to drink, and living in a mean street: these, others would have found unbearably depressing, but for Hui's happiness they made no difference at all" (Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 1948). Hui's happiness was

a natural outcome of his state of mind. This concept has dominated China for more than 2500 years, and Hongqi makes it very clear in his interview that he is happy because he has made himself useful, not only to society but also to his parents and his own family.

China is in the midst of very rapid change. While the Calvinist ethic motivated its believers some 500 years ago, and since then, to work hard and be successful in business, the Confucian ethic has motivated Chinese migrant workers today to exploit all the opportunities they have to fulfill their obligations to each other. All of this demonstrates that Max Weber was right: culture matters. Today's Chinese

continue to embrace Confucianism, a culture that begins with self-reliance and personal responsibility, values that Weber overlooked. These values are what make migrant workers the "heroes" of China's mercurial rise.



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"Heroes of China's mercurial rise": migrant construction workers working high above the ground, Chengdu, China, 2013 (Photo credit: iStock by Getty Images).